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ABSTRACT

A recurring theme within the prolific body of research on reader response is that of reader stance. Although several prominent theories of reader response spring from different perspectives, they share one common property: each describes reader response in terms of two opposed domains with particular responses falling somewhere on a continuum between them. A composite of three models offers the shared features of each model appearing at the poles of the continuum. Efferent reading, the participant role, and interpersonal context all share public rather than personal tendencies and lean toward convergence of thought. Aesthetic reading, the spectator role, and intrapersonal context share personal and divergent qualities. Ironically, this composite configuration of similarities among theories also reveals a most glaring confusion of terminology. In whole language classrooms, reading focuses on authentic whole texts which nurtures development of aesthetic stance; conversely, instruction that overemphasizes attention to surface features such as letter-sound correspondence impedes its development. The impact of teacher questioning on students' responding implies the need for cautious examination of current practice to develop informed practice. Open-ended questions engender deep, personal connections between reader, writer (the text) and the rich social context of the classroom. (Four figures representing the various models are included; 20 references are attached.) (RS)

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# Reader Stance: Whose Choice Is It?

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Reader Stance: Whose Choice Is It?

As a professional storyteller I have heard and seen evidence of aesthetic responses to story again and again. I believe in the power of story to evoke personal response because I have experienced it both as a reader, listener and teller of stories.

As a teller, I have been aware of changes in my stance within the telling of a single story. Often I begin to tell the story with my attention focused outward, toward the audience who is listening, when something in the story connects to some very personal memory or feeling. My attention then focuses inward, and although the audience still sits before me listening for the next word, I find I am telling the story to *myself*. The feelings evoked through this co-creation of story can be so strong that to continue the story for the listeners requires a conscious refocusing outward.

The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree by Gloria Houston is one story that has given me this experience. In this story set near Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina, Ruthie and her papa climb the rocky craigs in early spring to find a perfect tree to give to the village church on Christmas next. They select a balsam and mark it with Ruthie's hair ribbon. During the summer, Papa is called to fight in a war across the sea. Christmas Eve approaches and he has not yet returned, so Mama and Ruthie climb the mountain to bring back the tree for the village church. After the service, Ruthie is given the best gift of all--her Papa home from the war! To learn this story for telling, I used an outward, or efferent stance; I focused on the scenes, their order, the particular words I wanted to include. I also use an outward, efferent stance in telling the story to an audience; my attention is again focused on the story structure and just the right words to give the effect I intend. But as the story unfolds, my approach becomes more personal with my attention focused inward on the story I am creating at that moment. This personal story runs parallel to the learned textual story. When Ruthie prays for her papa's safe return in time for Christmas, I am a

child again, petitioning my own father's safekeeping. When Ruthie's mama sacrifices her precious silk stockings and wedding gown to sew a doll for Ruthie, I feel inexpressible joy in the selfless gifts my own mother has given me. As I told this story in December of 1990, I looked into the faces of my listeners and wondered if any of them had a loved one poised to fight in a war across the sea. The creation of this personal story can be so powerful as to interrupt the telling until I can refocus, or balance my stance outward toward my audience.

## Questions of Stance

A recurring theme within the prolific body of research on reader response is that of reader stance. What do readers (or writers, or speakers, or listeners of discourse) do when reading a literary work of art that is different from what they do when reading the installation procedures for new computer software? What determines the focus or purpose for reading? Is it the text, the reader, the context, or the interaction of all three? These are the queries that have led to the formulation of several prominent theories which this paper critically examines.

Although the theories spring from different perspectives they share one common property: each describes reader response in terms of two opposed domains with particular responses falling somewhere on a continuum between them. Because the domains are conceptualized from differing perspectives, the language of the theories has resulted in terminological confusion. While obvious differences do exist, a closer look reveals significant similarities, and it is these very similarities which have the greatest import on instructional practice.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this inquiry draws upon the work of Louise Rosenblatt, James Britton and Arthur Applebee, David Bloome and Judith Green. Rosenblatt (1985, 1978) questioned what readers do

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differently when reading a literary work of art such as a novel or poem, or when reading a scientific text. She determined the difference centered in focus of attention. When approaching reading from an efferent stance, the reader attends to what will remain after the reading event, usually information or actions to be carried out. When approaching reading from an aesthetic stance, the reader's attention is focused on the lived through event, "the associations, feelings, attitudes and ideas that these words and their referents arouse within him." (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 25).

Rosenblatt (1982) likens stance to expression of purpose. In efferent reading the purpose centers on information or suggested actions that remain after the reading is done; but the purpose in aesthetic reading is fulfilled during the event. Taking one approach does not preclude awareness of elements of the other (Rosenblatt, 1980, 1978). Reader stance, or purpose, is a matter of degree. The reader selectively attends to either aesthetic or efferent elements, and this choice of stance does not need to be consciously made. The purpose may change as the reading progresses; stance does not necessarily remain static throughout the reading event. Figure 1 offers a model.

James Britton (1984) also recognized that the reader selects a stance, but propounds that it is driven by the text and is, therefore, a function of the writer's choice. In the mid-1960's he introduced the concepts of spectator and participant as domains of discourse function. In the participant role, language is used to get things done or to get information. Language in the spectator role is poetic; it is the language of literature. The participant's purpose is to engage in a verbal transaction but the spectator's purpose is to create a verbal object. Britton's theory shows congruence with Rosenblatt's in that efferent reading is the appropriate participant response and aesthetic reading is appropriate in the spectator role.

Arthur Applebee (1973, 1978) further explicated the roles of spectator and participant. Like Britton, Applebee emphasized that the reader's choice of role is governed by language conventions within the text; the writer indicates for the reader which role to assume. He also proposed that most works cue both roles in varying degrees, and assumption of a role operates on a continuum. Figure 2 offers a model.

A third way of looking at the theme of reader stance is through the domains of intrapersonal and interpersonal reading contexts. Bloom and Green (1984) describe the intrapersonal context as the personal schema or mental setting that the individual reader brings to a particular reading act. The interpersonal context includes the interactions of readers involved in a reading event, and the negotiations of meaning they make through those interactions. The intrapersonal domain implies private, divergent tendencies as opposed to the public, convergent tendencies implied by the interpersonal domain. The salience of this perspective is clearly observable in the oral language mode of storytelling (Nelson, 1990). Figure 3 offers a model.

Figure 4 presents a composite of the three models. The shared features of each model appear at the poles of the continuum. Efferent reading, the participant role, and interpersonal context all share public rather than personal tendencies and lean toward convergence of thought. Aesthetic reading, the spectator role, and intrapersonal context share personal and divergent qualities. While the efferent/aesthetic and participant/spectator domains span a continuum, it is fitting that the sociopsycholinguistic intrapersonal/interpersonal domains intersect that continuum since context exceeds the confines of either response approach. The poles are now labeled "outward" meaning receiving information or a "detached spectator response" (Nelson, 1990, p. 33) and "inward" meaning reading as a performing art or living through the event to more accurately reflect the characteristic behavior of each approach.

**EFFERENT**

what remains after
information
actions

**AESTHETIC**

lived-through event
feelings
attitudes

Figure 1

**PARTICIPANT**

engages in verbal transaction
information
to get something done

**SPECTATOR**

creates verbal object
poetic
literary

Figure 2

**INTERPERSONAL**

negotiation of meaning
through social interaction
public
convergent

**INTRAPERSONAL**

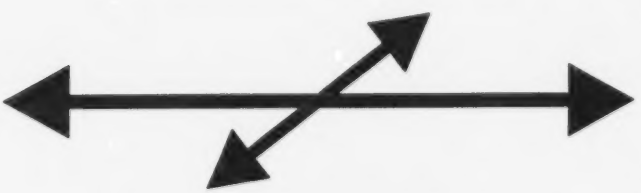
mental set
or schema
personal
divergent

Figure 3

**INTRAPERSONAL**

**OUTWARD**

(public / convergent)
Efferent
Participant



**INWARD**

(private / divergent)
Aesthetic
Spectator

**INTERPERSONAL**

Figure 4

Ironically, this composite configuration of similarities among theories also reveals a most glaring confusion of terminology. By natural definition, "spectator" implies a outward response and "participant" implies an inward response; the positions of "participant" and "spectator" appear to be reversed. Britton and Applebee developed the concept of spectator within a very specific context, meaning one who is distanced enough from the demands of direct participation to allow for personal, subjective involvement with the work, particularly a literary work (Applebee, 1985). From their perspective of writer, they limit the definition of spectator and participant, linking "spectator" with literature and limiting "participant" to expository text. Rosenblatt (1985b) challenges Britton's terminology by arguing that even a literary work may be directly experienced; spectator still means onlooker, but even in that role the reader is also a participant living through the event (1985). Further confusion results within storytelling contexts where a spectator is a watcher with attention directed outward, but a participant is a co-creator of story with attention directed inward (Baker and Greene, 1987; Nelson, 1990). To further support adoption of natural definitions, the ethnographic research often employed to investigate reader response defines participant as the active, inward focused role and spectator as the passive, outward focused role. (Rosenblatt, 1984). When the spectator, or observer, becomes part of the observation, he/she becomes a participant; these roles, too, operate on a continuum (Patton, 1990). As the domains are applied more widely to different kinds of discourse, the terms assume a natural, public definition. This is the pivotal point in clearing the confusion. This natural use of terms is especially appropriate within the culture of the classroom where students and teachers go about the day to day business of making sense of text, and ultimately, the world.

Implications for Instruction

Given that reader stance is a matter of choice and is not immutable but vacillates along a continuum, what governs the choices, the movement toward first one domain and then the other? The text itself is an obvious influence. The print offers visual cues through conventions and form; the broad margins and uneven lines of a poem steer the reader toward the aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1980). Yet that same poem could be read efferently, with deliberate attention given, for example, to author's style, choice of words, or the historical context. Choice of stance is influenced but not bound by the text (Rosenblatt, 1982).

Social context exerts influence on choice of stance. Rosenblatt (1982) identifies similarities between aesthetic response and children's early language behavior. This suggests a change in focus is needed: "Given the linguistic development of the child, probably there should be greater emphasis in the earlier stages on aesthetic listening and reading." (p. 275). In whole language classrooms, reading focuses on authentic whole texts which nurtures development of the aesthetic stance; conversely, instruction that overemphasizes attention to surface features such as letter- sound correspondence impedes its development.

With this focus on the personal, aesthetic approach, the import of the social context of the classroom clearly emerges. The interaction between teachers and students holds the most significance for this inquiry. Through their observations of children with books, Hepler and Hickman (1982) concluded that what children do, what they say, what they seem to think about in response all bear the influence of other people in some way. The literacy interactions of students and teachers in the culture of the classroom are inextricably woven together.

The effects of classroom discourse upon literacy development have been diligently researched and documented (DeStefano, Papinsky, and Sanders, 1982; Green and Harker, 1982; Green, Golden, and Harker, 1987).

Teacher expectation, the types of questions they ask, the amount of wait-time for thoughtful answers, and peer negotiation all have the power to shape student responses. In many classrooms, becoming literate often translates into following classroom procedures and giving the usual one-word answers to questions.

The impact of teacher questioning on student responding implies the need for cautious examination of current practice to develop informed practice. Purves (1985) expresses the belief that a formal teacher may unknowingly solicit formal responses; reader stance may actually be a learned behavior. A reader's aesthetic response can be obstructed by questions that only seek concrete, in-the-text details for answers (Rosenblatt, 1982). Open-ended questions that ask students "What did you like about what you read?" "What did you notice? What did you remember?" will foster responses that keep the personal, lived-through elements in mind. (Rosenblatt, 1982; Nelson, 1990).

This line of inquiry leads to enormous implications for assessment of reader response and comprehension of text. Objective, multiple-choice tests do not provide a means to reflect personal lived-through events; furthermore, acceptance of their validity beyond question results in efferent teaching toward the tests. This removes choice of stance from the purview of the reader. Alternative evaluation measures abound and might include journal response (Newton, 1991), holistic scoring of response statements, and most simply of all, teachers talking with their students (Cooper, 1985). Asking open-ended questions reflects respect for student thought. These questions engender, deep, personal connections between reader, writer (the text), and the rich social context of the classroom (Nelson, 1990). When this inward focus is invited along with the outward, both are enriched. More importantly, the reader takes ownership of the choice of reader stance.

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